

MOTION BY SUPERVISOR MICHAEL D. ANTONOVICH

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INVESTIGATING CHILD ABUSE IN COUNTY-CONTRACTED FOSTER CARE FACILITIES

As of December 2009, the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) is overseeing 32,200 children who have been abused or neglected by their biological parents or caregivers. Of these children, 15,800 have been detained from and placed outside of their birth homes. Of those children placed outside of their birth homes, 7,500 are placed in the homes of their relatives. The remaining 8,300 children are placed in State-licensed out-of-home care facilities, of which 1,400 children are placed in State-licensed foster homes; 6,000 children are placed in foster family agency-certified homes; and 900 children are placed in group homes.

Abuse or death of a child is always a tragedy. However, when the County removes an abused child from his/her birth family and places that child in an environment where he or she is further abused or even killed, it is outrageous. Protecting abused children who remain in their birth homes requires intensive up-front services. However, protecting abused children, detained from their birth homes and placed in State-licensed, County-contracted foster care facilities, is an equally complex but different process. The County must ensure the facility's programmatic and fiscal compliance with its contractual requirements and, upon receipt of an allegation of child endangerment perpetrated by a foster care provider, investigate the safety of the alleged victim(s), as well as apply child abuse investigation expertise to join the State in the final analysis of whether the facility, as a whole, is an appropriate place for the current and future placement of children.

Currently, the Auditor-Controller and DCFS are respectively auditing and monitoring County-contracted Foster Family Agencies and Group Homes to establish programmatic and fiscal compliance with their performance-based contractual requirements. The Auditor-Controller performs fiscal reviews of both Foster Family Agencies and Group Homes; and program reviews of Foster Family Agencies. DCFS

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performs program reviews of Group Homes and monitors the performance standards of both Foster Family Agencies and Group Homes.

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Within this process, what remains unresolved is whether audit redundancy between the Auditor-Controller and DCFS exists; and how to more effectively oversee implementation of the actions that would correct deficiencies identified by their respective and independent reviews. Furthermore, what remains inadequately addressed is the concept of investigating the facility as a whole, rather than only the alleged victim when a foster care provider is under suspicion of child endangerment.

Over a decade ago, the DCFS Out-of-Home Care Evaluation Unit (OHCEU) was charged with conducting foster care investigations. Unlike a Children's Social Worker, whose only "client" is the allegedly victimized child assigned to his/her caseload, the OHCEU Investigator's client was the facility. Upon cross-report of alleged child endangerment to OHCEU, the role of the OHCEU Investigator was twofold - (1) to require ALL DCFS Children's Social Workers with children simultaneously placed in the same facility to report-back on each child's safety; and (2) to coordinate efforts with both State Community Care Licensing and the County Auditor- Controller to comprehensively determine whether the facility met the general standards for the placement of County-supervised children. This dually-focused model of child/facility review was very successful in ensuring child safety; supporting facilities in meeting their programmatic and fiscal contractual requirements; or, as a last resort, objectively terminating the County's future relationship with the facility or agency.

In 2004, DCFS disbanded OHCEU, presuming that the State Community Care Licensing staff and the County Emergency Response Social Workers would perform OHCEU's responsibilities. However, with the State's budgetary crisis diminishing the State's oversight of its licensed facilities as frequently as mandated; and the County's increasing workload demands placed upon front-end Children's Social Workers to keep children safely in their birth homes, the 2004 decision ultimately yielded the unintended consequence of a loss of the County's comprehensive perspective of its contracted foster care facilities'/agencies' overall effectiveness.

I, THEREFORE, MOVE that the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors direct the Chief Executive Officer, in conjunction with the Auditor-Controller, the Director of Children and Family Services and the Acting Chief Probation Officer, to report-back in 30 days and quarterly thereafter on the development of a plan, **within existing resources**, for a strength-based, efficient and effective process to both eliminate redundancy within the function of auditing/monitoring State-licensed, County-contracted foster care facilities; AND to add child welfare investigative expertise back into the process of analyzing a facility's appropriateness, as a whole, when a foster care provider is alleged to have endangered a County-supervised child.

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